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Photo. by H. Ries. Aug. 1912

The Source of the Columbia River

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View looking South across the Portage to Kootenay River

THE FUR TRADE IN THE COLUMBIA RIVER BASIN PRIOR TO 1811

By T. C. ELLIOTT*

One of the present activities of the historical societies of Oregon and Washington is the publication of source material relating to the early fur trade along the Columbia River. It has been a popular and to an extent a scientific habit to refer to the city of Astoria as the oldest trade center of the Old Oregon Country; some of our histories furnish evidence to that effect. It was on the 12th of April, 1811, that the officers and employees of the Pacific Fur Company were landed from the ship *Tonquin* and established a temporary encampment on the south side of the Columbia River, ten miles from Cape Disappointment, and immediately thereafter began the erection of the trading post named by them Fort Astoria. On the 15th of July, four months later, David Thompson, the North-West Company fur trader and astronomer, coming from the source of the river recorded in his journal: "At 1 P. M., thank God for our safe arrival, we came to the house of Mr. Astor's Company, Messrs. McDougall, Stuart and Stuart, who received me in the most polite manner." And in another connection Mr. Thompson has recorded that the establishment then consisted of "four low log huts." It is the purpose of this paper to designate ad seriatim the trading posts that had been built and in use west of the Rocky Mountains prior to the founding of Astoria and to briefly sketch the beginnings of the fur trade on the waters of the mighty Columbia River.

The first barter with white people by the natives residing on the Columbia River was with the masters of trading vessels along the Coast, of which little record has been left to us. When Captains Lewis and Clark, the explorers, descended the river in the fall of 1805 they found among Indians living quite a distance in the interior "sundry articles which must have been procured from the white people, such as scarlet and blue

*A paper read at the meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at the University of Washington, Seattle, May 21st, 1914.

cloth, a sword, jacket and hat;" and in their journals also appears a list of the names of about a dozen traders who had been accustomed to frequent the Coast at the mouth of the river. When Lieut. Broughton, of the British Royal Navy, in the *Chatham* sailed cautiously into the Columbia River in the early afternoon of October 21, 1792, he passed at anchor behind Cape Disappointment a trading brig named the *Jenny*, one Captain Baker in command (after whom Baker's Bay takes its name) and Broughton records that this captain had been there earlier in the same year. The name of Captain Baker does not appear on the list of names set down by Lewis and Clark; by them this same bay was named Haley's Bay, after a trader then best known to the Chinook Indians. These brief recitals in authentic records have led some to an unanswered inquiry as to whether some itinerant trader may not have actually sailed into the Columbia River in advance of its discovery by Captain Robert Gray in May, 1792. The diplomats of Great Britain raised no such claim in connection with the dispute over the Oregon boundary line, however.

Turning now to the sources of the Columbia an interesting contrast exists between the beginning of trade there with that on the upper Missouri River, across the Rocky Mountain range. Manual Lisa is the name prominently connected with the Missouri River at that period; immediately following the return of the Lewis and Clark expedition Lisa built a trading post on the Yellowstone River at the mouth of the Big Horn and began to purchase furs for transport to St. Louis; that was during the summer of 1807. At the same time David Thompson, a partner of the North-West Company of Canada, was building an establishment at the head waters of the Columbia from which he transported furs to the Rainy Lakes, and Fort William on Lake Superior. Manual Lisa had troubles enough with snags and Indians along the Missouri and was resourceful to overcome them. David Thompson experienced even greater difficulties in crossing the Rocky Mountains and descending the long course of the Saskatchewan River to Lake Winnipeg. David Thompson is one of the most remarkable figures con-

nected with the history of the Columbia River; the record of his career written with his own hand is not only of great scientific value, but an inspiration to any earnest student of the history of this Pacific Northwest. He has been described as the greatest land geographer the English race has ever produced.

The Columbia River is estimated to be 1,300 miles in length and Kettle Falls, in the State of Washington, about forty miles below the Canadian boundary, marks very closely the half-way point on the river. It may be said rather broadly, then, that one-half of the river is in British Columbia and one-half in the United States, speaking of the main river and not of its branches. The statesmen who decided the Oregon boundary question did not have this equal division in mind, but nature has furnished this suggestion of their fairness.

As if to purposely render our history romantic the first trading post upon any of the waters of the Columbia River, including its branches, was built almost at the very source of the main river, near the outlet of the chain of small lakes which resolve themselves into the river. Tobey Creek, flowing eastward from the glaciers of Mt. Nelson, of the Selkirk Range, enters the Columbia River from the west about one mile below the outlet of Lake Windermere, in the political division of British Columbia known as the East Kootenay District. Upon an open gravelly point overlooking Tobey Creek and "a long half mile" (quoting from David Thompson's original survey notes) from the Columbia stood the stockade and buildings marking the beginning of commerce in the interior of "Old Oregon." The exact site of this house has recently become known by the unearthing of the old chimneys of the buildings, as well as by Indian tradition. An earlier location on Canterbury Point, Lake Windermere, at first selected was abandoned before any buildings were completed, because of exposure in procuring water for domestic use (compare with Lyman's *History of the Columbia River*, Putnam's Sons, 1911, page 282). "Kootenae House" was the name given to this trading post, and it is not to be confounded with the Fort

Kootenay of a later date and different location. Nor are we to forget that on the waters of the Fraser River Basin trading posts had been established in the year 1806 by Simon Fraser and his partners.

In this romantic locality David Thompson spent the fall, winter and spring of 1807-8 in company with his clerk, Finan McDonald, and six servants. He put out his thermometer and set down the first record of the weather in interior British Columbia. With other scientific instruments he determined the latitude and longitude of the House and of the lakes. He bestowed the name upon Mt. Nelson (now locally known as Mt. Hammond), which looms up so grandly to the westward of Lake Windermere, and determined its altitude. He found bands of wild horses roaming over the hills and caught some of them; he observed and made record of the habits of the salmon spawning in the river. He gathered in trade one hundred skins of the wild mountain goat, which brought a guinea apiece in the London market. He was besieged for some weeks by a band of Piegan Indians who crossed the Rocky Mountains with instructions to kill him, because the prairie Indians did not wish to have the Kootenaes supplied with firearms, powder and ball. In March, 1808, Mr. James McMillan visited him from Rocky Mt. House, on the Saskatchewan, with dog teams and sleds, bringing more trading goods and carrying back as many packs of furs. His trade was with the Kootenaes of the vicinity, and from as far south as Northwestern Montana, of the United States. In April, 1808, he made an exploring trip down the Kootenay River as far as Kootenay Lake, and in June recrossed the Rocky Mountains with his furs and carried them to Rainy Lake House before again returning to Kootenae House for another winter. The government of British Columbia could well afford to permanently mark the site of Kootenae House in honor of this remarkable trader, astronomer and pathfinder.

At the beginning of the second winter at Kootenae House, Mr. Thompson felt sufficiently acquainted with the country and the Indians to begin to push the trade further to the south.



Photo. by H. Ries and T. C. Elliott

Site of "Kootenae House" near Lake Windermere, British Columbia

View looking Northeast across Valley of Columbia River

Photo. shows Michel Pete, a full blooded Kootenay Indian, standing among excavated chimney bottoms

The Kootenay River, taking its rise in the main range of the Rocky Mountains, flows southward into the United States in Montana, and in its course passes within a mile and a half of the lake out of which as its real source the waters of the Columbia River flow northward for 200 miles before turning to the south. The divide between Columbia Lake and the Kootenay River is not a ridge or a mountain, but a level flat of gravelly soil not at all heavily timbered, which affords a very easy portage for canoes. Across this portage in November, 1808, went Finan McDonald, Mr. Thompson's clerk, with a load of trading goods, and descended the Kootenay River to a point on the north bank, just above Kootenay Falls, and nearly opposite to the town of Libby, which is the county seat of Lincoln County, Montana, and there set up two leather lodges for himself and his men, and built a log house to protect the goods and furs and spent the winter, being joined later by James McMillan, already mentioned. Here, during the winter of 1808-9, were carried on the first commercial transactions of white men south of the forty-ninth parallel of north latitude, and in that part of the Old Oregon Country which afterward became a part of the United States.

News travels rapidly among the Indians and later events indicate that furs must have been brought to this winter camp from the Saleesh or Flathead country to the southeast, and from the region of Pend d'Oreille Lake to the southwest. About three years later, at a point a few miles further up the Kootenay River, but on the same side (nearly opposite Jennings, Montana), the North-West Company erected a more permanent trading post, known as Fort Kootenay, in opposition to which, in 1812, the Pacific Fur Company built another fort near by. At Fort Kootenay took place the bloodless duel between Nicholas Montour and Francis Pillet "with pocket pistols at six paces; both hits; one in the collar of the coat, and the other in the leg of the trousers. Two of their men acted as seconds, and the tailor speedily healed their wounds." This is the story told by the facile pen of Ross Cox.

The year 1809 brought to the active notice of the North-Westerns the intention of John Jacob Astor to occupy the mouth of the Columbia River, and the records of the House of Commons in London show a petition from the North-West Company for a charter which would give them prior rights to trade upon Columbian waters. David Thompson, however, was not waiting for charters, but prepared to act according to the teachings of the later David Harum, that is "to do to the other fellow as he would do to you and do it fust." He knew from the results of the winter trade at Kootenay Falls that there were Indians of a friendly disposition living to the south of the Kootenay, and doubtless he also had already some knowledge of the route of the Lewis and Clark party on their return trip in 1806, for the following year he had a copy of Patrick Gass' Journal with him as he traveled. So after a trip across the Rocky Mountains to leave his furs and obtain more trading goods, he returned to the Columbia during the summer of 1809, and from there descended the Kootenay River as far as the present site of Bonner's Ferry, in Idaho, where his goods were transferred to pack animals and taken southward across the regular Indian trail (the "Lake Indian Road," as he called it) to Pend d'Oreille Lake. And on the 10th of September, 1809, upon one of the points jutting out into the lake near the town of Hope, Idaho, he set up his leather lodge or tent upon the site of the next trading post upon Columbian waters, which was called "Kullyspell House." A substantial log house was at once built for the protection of the goods and furs and another for the officers and men, and Mr. Finan McDonald placed in charge. Kullyspell House did not remain in active use for more than two winters, probably, other posts to the eastward and westward being found sufficient to care for the trade; but business was lively there during the season of 1809-10. Ross Cox, who passed that way in the fall of 1812, makes no mention of this Post, but John Work, when crossing the lake in 1825, mentions a camp at "the Old Fort." No trace of its site has been found in these later years.



Photo. by T. C. Elliott

Thompson's Prairie, Montana, looking Southeast from site of "Saleesh House"

Canyon of Thompson River on left, and of Clark Fork River on the right

No sooner had the buildings of Kullyspell House been well begun than David Thompson set off again, to the southeastward up the Clark's Fork of the Columbia River, in the direction of the principal habitat of the Saleesh Indians, a tribe more commonly but less properly known as the Flatheads. He traveled about seventy-five miles up the river to a small plain ever since known as Thompson's Prairie, and on a bench overlooking the north bank of Clark's Fork River, located his next trading post, called Saleesh House. Three miles below is Thompson's Falls and two miles above is Thompson River, and to the State of Montana alone belongs the distinction of preserving to history in its nomenclature a permanent reference to this indefatigable and remarkable man. Thompson's Prairie appears to have been in olden times a refuge of the Saleesh Indians when pursued by their enemies, the roving Piegans or Blackfeet. Just above the prairie to the southeastward the hills again hug the river on either side, and there is a stretch of shell or sliding rock over which the Indian trail passed. This place is locally known to the Indians as Bad Rock and across it the Piegans did not dare to pass; and Mr. Thompson carefully placed his "House" on the safe side of Bad Rock. After acquiring firearms the Saleesh were on more of an equality with the Piegans and able to defend themselves in battle, both when hunting the buffalo along the Missouri River and in their own country. So in later years this trading post was, temporarily at least, removed further up the river beyond Bad Rock. In 1824-25 it was located where the Northern Pacific Railroad station named Eddy now is, and later it was near Weekesville, a few miles further up the river. About 1847 Angus McDonald removed it to Post Creek, near the St. Ignatius Mission, in the beautiful Flathead Valley. Wherever located, it was the scene every winter of very lively and extensive trade, the Saleesh being of all the tribes of Indians the most moral and friendly in their relations with the whites, not even the Nez Perces being excepted. Missoula, Montana, today succeeds Saleesh House as the commercial center of the Flathead Country, and as a city exceeds Astoria in both popu-

lation and bank deposits. David Thompson spent the winter of 1809-10 at this trading post, in company with his clerk, James McMillan, who arrived in November by way of Kootenay River with additional trading goods. Again, in 1811-12, after his famous journey to the mouth of the Columbia, Mr. Thompson wintered here.

When in April, 1810, he started on his annual journey across the Rocky Mountains, Mr. McMillan accompanying him, by the usual long and wearisome series of canoe routes and portages, Mr. Thompson expected to be back again in the early fall, and he left Finan McDonald in charge of Saleesh House, with instructions or permission to assist the Saleesh Indians in the use of their newly-acquired firearms. Such an activity was very much to the liking of that restless Highlander, and he even accompanied the tribe on their annual buffalo hunt and took part in a successful battle with the Piegiens on the plains along the Missouri River. The Piegiens were so angered by this that they at once made trouble on the Saskatchewan River, further north, and prevented Mr. Thompson's party from returning over the usual mountain pass. He was compelled to seek a route through the Athabasca Pass, and as a result did not arrive at the Columbia at all until the middle of January, 1811, and was ice-bound for the rest of the winter at the mouth of Canoe River.

In April, 1810, when at Kullyspell House, Mr. Thompson had also engaged the services for the summer of one Jaco Finlay (whose full name was Jacques Raphael Finlay) an intelligent half-breed, who seems to have been already living in the Saleesh country as a sort of free-hunter; and the presumption is that he authorized Finlay to push the trade further west into the Skeetshoo, which would be the Coeur d'Alene Country. At any rate, when Mr. Thompson returned to the Saleesh Country in June, 1811, he found no one there nor at Kullyspell House; but he did find both Jaco Finlay and Finan McDonald residing and trading at a new post designated as Spokane House. To Jaco Finlay, then, possibly assisted by or assisting Finan McDonald, probably belongs the honor of

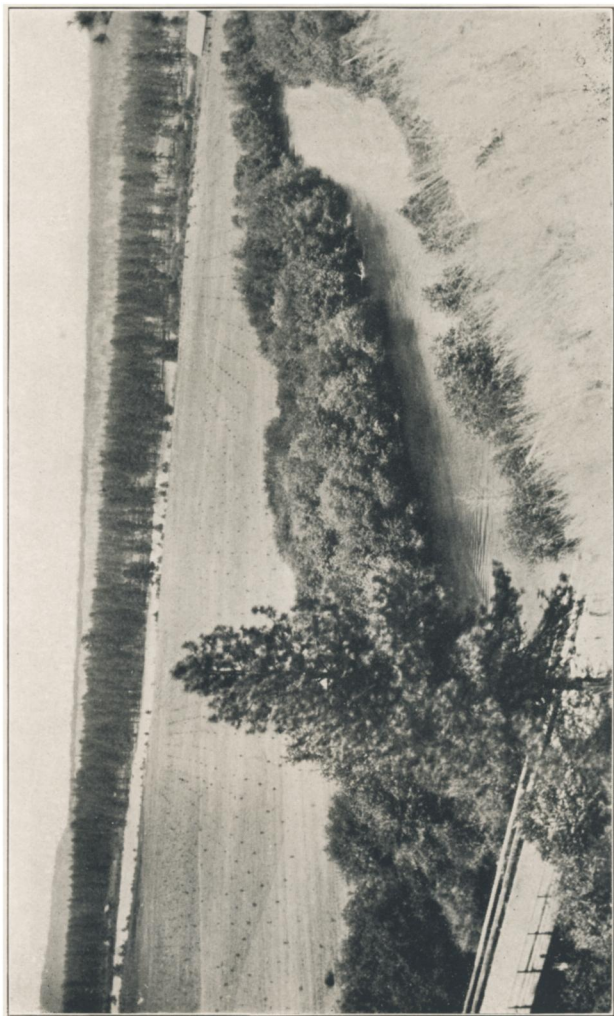


Photo. by T. C. Elliott

Site of "Spokane House," built in 1810

View looking West; Little Spokane river in foreground and Spokane River beyond

selecting the site and erecting the first buildings at Spokane House, located on a beautiful and sheltered peninsula at the junction of the Spokane (then known as the Skeetshoo River) and the Little Spokane rivers, a spot where the Indians were accustomed to gather in large numbers to dry their fish. The location was nine or ten miles northwest of the present flourishing city of Spokane, which has succeeded it as a natural trade center and which today outranks Astoria in both population and commercial importance. Alex. Henry states in his journal that Spokane House was established in the summer of 1810. It was maintained as the principal distributing point in the interior by the North-West Company and later by the Hudson's Bay Company until the spring of 1826, but was then abandoned in favor of a new post at Kettle Falls (Fort Colville) on the direct route of travel up and down the Columbia. The cellar holes of the buildings at Spokane House can still be indistinctly seen by those who know where to look for them. In 1812, a very short distance from these buildings, the Pacific Fur Company built a rival establishment, which was maintained until the dissolution of that company in the fall of 1813.

There remain to be mentioned three other valid attempts to establish trade relations in the basin of the Columbia, the first of which may have antedated the building of Spokane House by a brief period. This was the enterprise of the Winships of Boston, who sailed into the river in the spring of 1810 and began to erect some buildings on the Oregon shore at Oak Point, about fifty miles from the sea. This attempt was abandoned almost immediately because of the sudden rise of the river with the melting of the snows inland; it was a matter of weeks only and possibly of days. The *second* was the temporary residence of Andrew Henry, of the Missouri Fur Company, during the winter months of 1810-11 on the upper waters of the Snake River, near the present town of St. Anthony, Idaho (compare with Lyman's Hist. of the Columbia River, page 109). The overland party of Astorians found his abandoned cabins upon their arrival in the early fall of 1811, and it was many years afterward before Fort Hall was built

as a trading post in that general locality. The *third* was the only attempt of the Hudson's Bay Company to compete with their rival, the North-West Company, for the Indian trade west of the Rocky Mountains. Alexander Henry makes mention in his journal of the starting off of this expedition from Rocky Mountain House on the Saskatchewan in the summer of 1810, under the charge of Joseph Howse, and states that James Mc-Millan was sent to follow and keep watch of them. David Thompson, when near the source of the Columbia in May, 1811, on his way from Canoe River to the Saleesh Country and beyond, met an Indian who told him that this Hudson's Bay Company party was already returning and was then at Flathead Lake. It is not positive where this party spent the winter, but in his "Fur Hunters of the Far West" (Vol. 2, p. 9), Alexander Ross places them on Jocko Creek in Missoula County, Montana, near where the town of Ravalli is now situated; while an early edition of the Arrowsmith map of British North America (which maps were dedicated to the Hudson's Bay Company, and purported to contain the latest information furnished by that company), shows their trading post at the head of Flathead Lake very near to where the city of Kalispell, Montana, now is.

The editor of a prominent newspaper in Montana, upon reading of the establishment of Saleesh House by David Thompson in the year 1809, wrote that they were beginning to feel quite antiquated in Western Montana. Trade in the Kootenay District of British Columbia antedated the building of Astoria by three and a half years, and that in the Flathead Country of Montana by one and a half years, and that at Spokane, Washington, by at least six months. The cities that have become the commercial centers of these interior districts have not been built upon the exact sites of the early trading posts unless that may be said as to Spokane, Washington, but have all been built along the same established Indian trails or roads, and these have become the transcontinental railroads of today.

Search for the existing records of these early enterprises and for physical remains of the early trading posts may be

likened to the search for gold by the miners of the "Inland Empire" during the early sixties. The Old Oregon Country is as rich in history as in the precious metals; the search for the one adds to our culture and that for the other only to our material wealth.